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## AMERICUS VESPUCIUS.

BY

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One of the things that ought to be done in this quadri centennial year is to revise and reconstruct the biography of Americus Vespucius. There is need of a change and of a thorough reform in the estimation in which the character and conduct of this personage is generally held. Able and generous contributions to this result have been made by two eminent historians and scholars—M. de Varnhagen, of Brazil, and Mr. John Fiske, in his new work on the “Discovery of America.” I shall frequently, in the following lines, avail myself of the labors of these authors in this direction.

It seems to be well known to everybody that the name “America” was derived in some way or another more or less directly from Vespucius. The feeling, too, is prevalent, if not universal, that this was all wrong, and that the Western Continent ought to have been named after Christopher Columbus, who discovered it. So great an iniquity and injustice to him must have had an authorship. And who could have been the author, if it was not Vespucius himself? He was known, so people thought and said, to have made all sorts of lying pretences about what he had done and what discoveries he

had made. Anyhow, he was a bad and wicked man, so much so that there was no act so base or vile in itself or so treacherous toward Columbus that he would have been found incapable of performing. It would therefore be only meting out to him his just deserts if the blame and infamy of imposing his name upon the new continent were charged to himself. Thus a torrent of vituperation of him has been flowing on and on and on, for more than three hundred years, through the pages of history and criticism. And one of the latest contributions to this dark and dismal flood was made by the distinguished philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the following passage from his "English Traits": "Strange that broad America must wear the name of a thief. Amerigo Vespucci, the pickle-dealer at Seville, who went out, in 1499, a subaltern with Hojeda, and whose highest naval rank was boatswain's mate in an expedition that never sailed, managed in this lying world to supplant Columbus and baptize half the earth with his own dishonest name" (*English Traits*, Riverside ed., 1883, p. 148).

More than fifty years ago, Alexander von Humboldt entered into an elaborate discussion of the origin of the name "America," in his work entitled "Examen Critique de l'Histoire de la Géographie du Nouveau Continent." He pointed out clearly when, where and by whom the name was first suggested, and in conclusion he fully exonerated Vespucci from all blame in the matter. These are his words: "Il résulte de mes recherches que, pour le moins, le nom d'Amérique a été inventé et répandu à l'insu de ce voyageur" (Vol. IV., p. 34).

First in the chain of events that led to the sugges-

tion of the name "America" was the third voyage of Vespucius. In this, as in all his voyages, he was not the commander of the expedition. He served almost always in a subordinate capacity, as pilot or astronomer or both. In this third voyage he sailed from Lisbon, May 14, 1501, and returned there September 7, 1502. He first touched the coast of Brazil at Cape San Roque, in latitude about  $5^{\circ}$  S. Thence he followed the coast as far as latitude  $34^{\circ}$  S., and then struck out to the south-east and reached the island of South Georgia, in latitude  $54^{\circ}$  S. Up to that time this was probably the longest voyage ever made, being in length more than one-fourth of the circumference of the globe. After his return to Lisbon, and in March or April, 1503, Vespucius wrote a letter to his old friend, Lorenzo de' Medici, giving an account of this voyage, and it was this letter and its contents that made him famous. He speaks of having formerly written to Lorenzo about his return from those new countries which he had sought and found in the service of the King of Portugal, "and which," he then adds, "it is proper to call a new world." The Latin text is as follows: "Quasque novum mundum appellare licet." The letter then continues in language which, as translated by Mr. Fiske, is as follows: "Since among our ancestors there was no knowledge of them [those new countries], and to all who hear of the affair it is most novel. For it transcends the ideas of the ancients; since most of them say that beyond the equator to the south there is no continent, but only the sea which they called Atlantic, and if any of them asserted the existence of a continent there, they found many reasons for refusing to

consider it a habitable country. But this last voyage of mine has proved that this opinion of theirs was erroneous and in every way contrary to the facts, since in those southern regions I have found a continent more thickly inhabited by peoples and animals than our Europe, or Asia, or Africa, and moreover a climate more temperate and agreeable than in any other region known to us; as you will understand below when I write you briefly just the main points, and [describe] the most remarkable things that were seen or heard by me in the new world—as will appear below” (*Discovery of America*, Vol. II., p. 109).

There is something a little mysterious, and at the same time rather interesting and impressive, about the phrase “new world,” as used in this letter of Vespucius. Clothed in its Latin dress, “it was lifted up from the text and turned into a catching title.” Thus the entire letter, with the heading or title “Mundus Novus,” was printed for the first time in Paris in 1504. It was a little tract of only four leaves, and only two copies are now known to exist. But it had a great run in the market for news, and it was variously translated and went through many editions. Three years after its first publication, and on the 25th of April, 1507 (the year after the death of Columbus), at Saint-Dié, in the Vosges, in the Duchy of Lorraine, there was first printed and published a suggestion or recommendation of the name “America.” It was contained in a little pamphlet, entitled “Introduction to Cosmography.” The authorship was not disclosed, but Von Humboldt, after a long and tedious search, traced it to Martin Waldseemüller, the German professor of geography in the College of

Saint-Dié. He first speaks of the division of the earth's inhabited surface into three parts. Then follows the memorable sentence containing the memorable suggestion, which, as translated from the Latin by Mr. Fiske, is as follows: "But now these parts have been more extensively explored and another fourth part has been discovered by Americus Vespucius (as will appear in what follows): wherefore I do not see what is rightly to hinder us from calling it Amerige or America, *i. e.*, the land of Americus, after its discoverer Americus, a man of sagacious mind, since both Europe and Asia have got their names from women" (*Discovery of America*, Vol. II., p. 136).

If the reader will now place these words of the professor at Saint-Dié, side by side with those copied just above from the letter of Vespucius to Lorenzo de' Medici, he will be struck with the coincidence of the ideas of the two. Prominent, if not uppermost, in the minds of both is the contrast between the old and the new, between Europe, Asia and Africa on the one hand, and the newly-discovered countries on the other. Vespucius says that in those southern regions he has found a continent more thickly inhabited than Europe, Asia, or Africa, speaking of each of these as a continent, as had been the custom from ancient times. Waldseemüller disposes of Europe, Asia and Africa as of three parts of the earth's surface, and then goes on to speak of a fourth part as newly discovered, and it is this and nothing other or more than this that he thinks ought to be named after Vespucius. He probably regarded the new discoveries as a verification of the doctrine held by Pomponius Mela, as opposed to Ptolemy, of

the existence of an antipodal world in the southern hemisphere. Geographers used to call this antipodal world the "Fourth Part," or in Latin, "*Quarta Pars*." And Waldseemüller was only following the fashion in describing the newly discovered countries in the same terms. He was doubtless familiar with the letter of Vespucius, and there is good evidence, if we had time and space to go into it, that he had a copy of it before him while writing his "*Introduction to Cosmography*."

Those who have studied this subject most, and who understand it best, are agreed that Vespucius, in his use of the phrase "new world," and in speaking of having found a continent, had no such thing in mind as the New World or the Western Continent, as we now understand those terms. These conceptions had hardly as yet found their way into the human mind anywhere. Vespucius died in 1512, and it was not until after his death that the name "America" was placed upon any map, chart, sketch or globe, and then at first only as a designation of what is now known as Brazil, in accordance with the suggestion of Waldseemüller. All this, of course, had nothing to do with Columbus or his discoveries, as he had never crossed or reached the equator.

As to the responsibility for the name "America," the rule that a man shall be held to be innocent until he is proved to be guilty was reversed in the case of Vespucius, and through ages upon ages he was believed, without evidence, to have usurped the name in order to cheat Columbus. Finally, Von Humboldt took hold of the matter, and to him, and him alone, is due the credit of determining the real authorship of the name, and of

proving a negative as to Vespucius by proving an affirmative as to Waldseemüller.

We come now to the specific charge against Vespucius, that he falsely pretended to have discovered the same lands and regions, upon a certain voyage made by him in 1497, as those discovered by Columbus, as all the world knows, in 1498. Right at this point we shall have to take a glance at the third voyage of Columbus. He sailed from Spain with six ships on May 30, 1498. On July 31st he arrived at an island on the north-eastern coast of South America, to which, from its three mountain peaks, he gave the name of Trinidad, which it still bears. On the inside of this island, and between it and the continent, lies the Gulf of Paria, an Indian name. The adjacent coast on the west is also called Paria. Columbus sailed through the Gulf from south to north. He then followed the northern coast of South America toward the west as far as the island of Margarita. He saw quantities of pearls in the possession of the natives, and used by them for ornament. Hence the name of Pearl Coast, given to this part of the continent. Thus it may be truly said that it was Columbus who, first of all Europeans, saw and touched the main land of South America. But he never supposed or imagined that the region thus discovered by him was a part of a new continent, and he died in the belief that the Pearl Coast was only a part of the main land of Eastern Asia. In 1499, the very next year after these discoveries of Columbus, Vespucius made a voyage right in the pathway of Columbus to Paria and the Pearl Coast. The expedition was commanded by Alonzo de Ojeda, the boldest and bravest



of the companions of Columbus on his second voyage. Ojeda and Vespucius followed the Pearl Coast much farther toward the west than Columbus had done.

Let me now call the attention of the reader to the letter of Vespucius in which he is supposed to have put forth false claims to discoveries made by him. It is dated from Lisbon, Sept. 4, 1504. There are two versions, one in Italian, and the other in Latin. I have spoken of the pamphlet of Waldseemüller, entitled "Introduction to Cosmography," recommending the name "America," and printed at Saint-Dié in April 1507. The Latin version of this last letter of Vespucius was brought in at the end of this pamphlet, as an appendix or *addendum* to it, and they were printed and published together. The translation into Latin was from a copy in French, received by René, duke of Lorraine, from Portugal. As thus translated the letter was addressed to René. Washington Irving, like most others, seems to have had no serious doubt about the authenticity and trustworthiness of this Latin version. In his note on Vespucius he speaks of the Italian version as a duplicate, and as not published earlier than 1510. But now and here comes M. de Varnhagen. He has been to Italy and he rummaged around there, through the libraries and archives and down to the bottom of things, and he tells us plainly, and he produces proofs that seem to be incontestable, that the Italian version of the letter of Vespucius is original and authentic, and was printed at Florence before July 9, 1506, nearly a year before the appearance of the Latin version at Saint-Dié, and was written and sent to Piero Soderini, a Florentine like Vespucius, and a fellow

student with him at Florence in their boyhood days, under the tutorship of an uncle of Vespucius ; and that on the other hand the Latin version, so far as regards the address to Duke René, is false and sham, as Vespucius never had any correspondence or relations of any kind with him. This last statement is borne out by the language of the letter, which is free and easy and familiar, and as such is natural and proper enough, if addressed to an old friend and schoolmate, but sounds absurd and impertinent if addressed to a stranger, and especially to such a dignitary as Duke René.

If we now proceed further with our comparison of the two versions of the letter of Vespucius, we shall find that the Italian grows better and better and the Latin worse and worse. Each contains a brief account of four voyages in their order as made by the writer, the first two in the service of Spain and the other two in the service of Portugal. As to the third of the four, it is the remarkable voyage to Brazil already mentioned as described in the letter of Vespucius to Lorenzo de' Medici. As to the fourth, there is no occasion to make further mention of it here. As to the second, it is the voyage made in 1499 with Ojeda to Paria and the Pearl Coast. We now come back to the first of the four. In the account of this, Vespucius says that he sailed from Cadiz on the 10th of May, 1497, and in the Latin version he is made to say that he went to Parias, "as that province is called by the people themselves." This word "Parias" seems to have been taken by everybody, and not unnaturally, to mean the same as Paria. Accordingly, we have before us the following strange and unaccountable state of things : 1st. Colum-

bus discovered Paria in 1498, as everybody knows ; 2d. Ojeda and Vespucius went there in the track of Columbus in 1499, as everybody knows ; 3d. Vespucius went there in his voyage of 1497, as nobody knows or ever heard of. If Vespucius tells the truth, then he anticipated and preceded Columbus by an entire year, and it was he and not Columbus that deserved the honors and rewards of the discovery of the north-eastern coast of South America. But there was never any evidence of any kind to support or confirm this story of Vespucius, and the universal judgment has been that it was a sheer fabrication, trumped up out of whole cloth, in order to secure the priority of discovery, and that its author was a falsifier of history and an impostor. But now it turns out that the falsification and imposition were all the work of careless and thoughtless copyists, translators and printers. For just at this point, M. de Varnhagen presents himself again, and kindly informs us that all our trouble comes from the mistakes of our Latin version, and that in the Italian version, Vespucius does not say in his account of his first voyage, that he went to Parias, but to "Lariab," which is quite a different part of the world from Paria. In the same connection, and only a few lines off, Vespucius says that this province of "Lariab" is under the tropic of Cancer in latitude  $23^{\circ}$  N. The latitude of Paria is about  $10^{\circ}$  N., so that there is a difference of about thirteen degrees between the two. M. de Varnhagen has calculated the courses and distances of this first voyage of Vespucius, as described in the Italian version of his letter, and he concludes that the route of this voyage was first to the northern coast

of Honduras, thence around Yucatan to Tabasco, thence to the western coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and thence back to and around Florida to the coast of the United States. He concludes further that "Lariab," as described by Vespucius, was a region on the west side of the Gulf of Mexico in the neighborhood of the modern city of Tampico. Mr. Fiske has made up the figures and he says that "this Tampico country is just 2400 miles distant, as the crow flies, from Paria, the region with which it has so long been stupidly identified" (*Disc. of Am.*, Vol. II., p. 54). Abundant evidence, which will have to be omitted here altogether, is brought forward to show the truthfulness and honesty of Vespucius in the description here given by him of his first voyage. The expedition appears to have been commanded by Vicente Yañez Pinzon, the captain of the Niña in the first voyage of Columbus, and by Juan Diaz de Solis, who after the death of Vespucius succeeded him as pilot major of Spain.

The Italian version of the letter of Vespucius was not brought out by the publisher in such a way as to give it much circulation. Indeed, it seems to have been forgotten or given up for lost for a long time, and until it was unearthed and brought to light by M. de Varnhagen. It was quite different with the corrupted Latin version, printed as an appendix to Waldseemüller's "Introduction to Cosmography." The suggestion of the name "America" operated as an advertisement for this pamphlet, and it had a large circulation and found its way everywhere. The different fortune of the two versions of the letter furnishes an illustration of the truth of the proverb or saying as to how

fast a lie will run when once started on its travels, and how slow the truth is in catching up with it. Furthermore, in and about the college of Saint-Dié there was at that time a little coterie of scientific busybodies, who used to sit together in solemn conclave upon the geographical affairs of the world, and they made things lively. They had the use of a little printing press, and they ground their lucubrations through it and scattered them abroad. One of these was the pamphlet of Waldseemüller. It immortalized the name of Vespucius and it blasted his character for three hundred years. A copy of it, more than thirty years after the death of Vespucius, fell into the hands of Las Casas, "the great apostle and historian of the Indies." His eye fell upon the word "Parias" in the account of the first voyage, and his mind without a second thought leaped to the conclusion that Vespucius falsely pretended to have discovered Paria in 1497, and it made him sick to think of him as "thus sinfully failing toward the Admiral." Afterwards, a long list of Spanish historians, so far as regards the character of Vespucius, lived and died in the same "slough of despond," that Las Casas had fallen into. It was much the same with Robertson, the Scotch historian, and also with Irving and Von Humboldt.

It has not been practicable to give an account of the writings of M. de Varnhagen on this subject. They consist of a series of monographs, published at different times in Vienna and Lima. They are all in the French language excepting one, and that is in Portuguese. A list of them is given by Mr. Fiske. These writings have been variously noticed in the American press, but

only in a superficial and perfunctory manner and without any adequate appreciation of their merits, until Mr. Fiske took hold of them and gave them a thorough examination and analysis, and to him belongs all the credit of giving them such an introduction as they deserve to the English reading public. The foregoing brief and hasty sketch of what has been done by M. de Varnhagen and Mr. Fiske is only a rough outline of what, with its framework of facts and its array of arguments, is really a magnificent structure, and I will end, as I began, with an earnest suggestion of the importance of a new biography of Vesputius, founded upon the labors and discoveries of these historians.